

# MULTIGENERATIONAL AND VIRTUAL: HOW DO WE BUILD A MENTORING PROGRAM FOR TODAY'S WORKFORCE?

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This article looks at virtual mentoring programs through a lens of generational differences, technological preferences, and communication styles. Best practices are framed to address the need to prepare the incoming millennials to lead the workforce as baby boomers exit. After a review of the literature, ideas are culled to apply the theory to a virtual mentoring program. Special attention is paid to the concept of virtual mentoring based on lack of collocation of modern teams.

virtual. With all of these variables, it is no wonder that our first attempt at the mentoring program failed. I began a search of ideas for improvement.

## BACKGROUND

As I set out on the research path looking for answers, I discovered that both mentoring and generational differences are popular topics. However, little research exists on how generational differences influence workplace mentoring on virtual teams. My purpose was to help performance improvement professionals understand how generational attitudes shape the mentoring relationships on virtual teams in the workplace. I believe that as more organizations face a geographically and generationally diverse workforce, workplace learning professionals will need to overcome barriers in virtual teams and mentoring programs.

In particular, I wanted to explore how the employees in the mentoring relationship would use technology to communicate and what pairing of generations works best. How successful is cross-generational mentoring on virtual teams? What is the optimal generational pairing in a virtual workplace mentoring relationship? How do mentors and mentees use technology based on generational placement?

The research reviewed here analyzed the generations of so-called radio babies, baby boomers, Gen Xers, and millennials. For the purposes of this article, radio

MEET TED, TODAY'S knowledge worker. He works from his employer's headquarters. Ted is a baby boomer, waiting for a rebound in his 401k so that he can retire. Ted's employer has a virtual mentoring program to ease the transition of new employees replacing retiring employees. Ted has been assigned to Steve, a millennial, who is new to the company and state. It's Ted's job to prepare Steve to take over. Steve, like many other millennials, was raised on technology. When Ted calls Steve for their daily mentoring session, he often detects that Steve is multitasking, using the call time to run an errand or respond to e-mails. Steve finds that most of his e-mails and texts to Ted are returned with phone calls or meeting requests. The two often complain about each other's work and communication style to their manager, Jill, a Gen Xer located at Ted's company headquarters. Jill often ends up translating Ted's style to Steve and vice versa while also helping Steve become more independent and Ted become more technology friendly.

This fictional story is representative of any number of generational relationships happening in the workplace today. The multigenerational workforce is often researched and discussed as a source of angst and managerial woe. Add the growing number of geographically diverse workforces to the generational differences, and you have a genuine managerial headache. In my workplace, we have both of these elements, and we are attempting to create a mentoring program that is partly

most concerning this article are conflict, communication, and technology use. Simoneaux and Stroud (2010) discuss the generations holistically. They present their research in the form of a case study based on workforces in the retirement services industry. Much of the article synthesizes existing research on the generations applied to industry. Baby boomers are considered "workaholics" (p. 67) and are willing to give on work/life balance. By contrast, Gen X witnessed parents working long hours; they were latchkey children and experienced parental layoffs. Therefore, Gen X requires an independent work environment and a strong work/life balance. Millennials, according to Simoneaux and Stroud, experienced a strong parental influence, engaged in group activities, and have always known technology. This leads

babies—those aged 65 to 80 years old—are excluded from the scope as they are typically retired. Conversely, millennials are included as active members of the workforce. They are members of the virtual teams I work with. I mention this because as recently as 2008, one article found that millennials were not active in the workplace (Johnson & Lopes, 2008).

Baby boomers, Gen X, and millennials are the principal generations in the workplace today (see Table 1 for their attributes). Several attributes have been catalogued in regard to each group. For the purpose of generational differences with mentoring on virtual teams, the attributes

## GENERATIONAL ATTRIBUTES

TABLE 1  
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	GENERATIONAL ATTRIBUTES		
	1946-1964 (NOW AGE 46-64) BABY BOOMERS, BORN	1964-1980 (NOW AGE 30-45) GEN XERS, BORN	1981-2000 (NOW AGE 10-29) MILLENNIALS, BORN
Generalizations	Majority of the current workforce Change the world Question authority Value involvement, optimism, personal gratification, work ahead in life Prefer traditional classroom-style learning	Smallest group of current workforce Be careful out there Distrust or ignore authority Value diversity, skepticism, pragmatism, informality	Entering workforce—largest group by 2016 Protect environment Respect authority and expect it returned Value optimism, global awareness, sociability, volunteering
Education	See education as the way to get ahead in life Prefer traditional classroom-style learning	See education as a means to an end, personal growth Prefer self-directed learning through technology	See education as a huge expense, believe in lifelong learning Prefer options: classroom, group activities, technology use, fun
Workplace	Work to live Classified as workaholic Work provides personal fulfillment Fax, express mail Positives: team player, driven, service oriented Negatives: process before results, judgmental of those with other viewpoints	Work/life balance Efficient Action oriented Email Positives: independent, technoliterate, creative, adaptable Negatives: impatient, cynical, poor people skills	Work/life balance Multitaskers Looking for what is next Email, text, instant messaging, state-of-the-art technology Positives: collaboration, tech savvy, multitasking Negatives: need supervision and structure, inexperienced
Feedback	Give feedback by giving money, title, recognition Considered politically correct Love meetings	Like to know status, reward with freedom Informal, abrupt Prefer structured meetings that are brief and to the point	Need continuous feedback and meaningful work Eager to please, inclusive Prefer meetings that are conversational and interactive
Communication	Learned technology at work, believe it improves personal productivity	Learned technology in school, believe it is critical for personal and work efficiency and best way to connect	Lifetime exposure to technology, believe it is core to life and work and way of thinking
Technology			



to their preferring a work environment with supervision, technology, and group activities. They need a work/life balance based on percentages of workload-to-fun rather than clock based with a 9-to-5 workday.

## GENERATIONAL CONFLICT

When looking at just conflict between generations, the literature shows mixed opinions. DiRomualdo's (2006) informal study of 70 knowledge workers found that it is possible for conflict to be present between generations. The study showed "the younger the worker, the more sensitive they were to generational differences, both positive and negative" (p. 20). DiRomualdo found that most of the sensitivity revolved around work values, communication styles, and technology. The data showed that 44% of the knowledge workers frequently or sometimes observed-coworkers from other generations being taken less seriously. Thirty-nine percent reported frequently or sometimes feeling that their coworkers from other generations did not respect them. It is important to note that DiRomualdo's informal study consisted of a sampling of participants in his generational differences workshop. Therefore, although the data may be applicable outside that particular workforce, we cannot assume it directly transfers.

By contrast, Johnson and Lopes, in a 2008 literature review, conclude that "there are little differences between motivations and organizational behavior across the various age groups" (p. 31). The authors believe "there is no solid social science evidence" (p. 33) for managing workers based on their generational grouping. Furthermore, they equate the generational grouping to stereotypes. For example, they cite several research studies that show three out of the top five job motivators were ranked the same by both baby boomers and Gen Xers. To the authors, this demonstrates that the generational attributes are really stereotypes.

## COMMUNICATION BETWEEN GENERATIONS

Simoneaux and Stroud (2010) identify the main attributes that they believe summarize the communication styles of the various generations. Baby boomers tend to present as "politically correct" (p. 69) and are said to prefer face-to-face meetings, at any time, for unspecified lengths of time. Gen Xers are typically described as "abrupt" (p. 69) and informal in their interaction style and are said to prefer meetings that are structured and to the point. Mostly they tend to prefer to communicate

## TECHNOLOGY USE BY GENERATION

asynchronously. Millennials are often portrayed as "eager to please" (p. 69) and inclusive. They tend to prefer meetings that are conversational and interactive with a blend of technology. Simoneaux and Stroud link meeting preferences back to work/life balance.

Given these differences in communication styles, the statistic that 76% of DiRomualdo's (2006) knowledge workers observed communication breakdowns between employees of different generations comes as no surprise. Even with this statistic, DiRomualdo points out that 76% of the knowledge workers said the different generations balance each other—thus showing that the breakdowns are not hindering performance.

Edmondson (2009) considers the noise surrounding the "ever-so-popular" four generations in the workplace" talk (p. 30) by presenting various communication styles based on personalities and context. The author states that "communication styles are probably more determined by our needs at a given moment than by our personalities" (p. 30). Without referencing any previous research, Edmondson discusses four styles: expressive, systematic, sympathetic, and direct. Her opinion is that all workers move between the styles based on needs of the moment and underlying personalities. This concept supports the communication attributes described by Simoneaux and Stroud (2010). A member of a generation may have a preference for a specific meeting style but can also move between styles, sometimes speaking with focus and energy (expressive) and sometimes being a good listener focused on people (sympathetic).

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"The technology gap remains one of the most challenging innovations" (Simoneaux & Stroud, 2010, p. 70). I believe this is where our focus as performance improvement professionals should be. Look at how each generation came to technology: baby boomers long after entering the workforce, Gen Xers in school prior to entering the workforce, and millennials practically from birth. Based on the age of exposure, Simoneaux and Stroud find that baby boomers generally see technology as a tool to improve









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